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MANAGING YOURSELF

Fire, Snowball, Mask, Movie

How Leaders Spark and Sustain Change

by Peter Fuda and Richard Badham

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What does it take for an ineffective manager to become a highly effective leader? Talk to 50 top CEOs, management consultants, and academics, and you'll get a different answer from each. There are countless books, models, and formulas for success. But the truth is this: Leadership transformation is deeply dependent on context. Everyone follows his own path, has her own story. The key for people who are seeking transformation is to identify the common threads in the experiences of others who have achieved success and absorb the insights they find there.

That was our ambition five years ago, when we embarked on a doctoral research project. We began with an in-depth study of seven CEOs whose success in transforming themselves, their leadership teams, and their organizations was well documented. They had all seen radical improvement in 360-degree feedback on their personal effectiveness, along with significant gains for their units or organizations in financial performance, customer approval, and employee engagement. We captured their stories through a series of lengthy interviews, conducted a rigorous linguistic analysis, and discovered that several themes were common to all seven in the challenges they faced and the strategies they used.

In ensuing conversations with these chief executives, we discovered that one of the best ways to elicit deep and broad discussion of those key themes—and to describe the CEOs' mastery of what they had learned—was through metaphor.
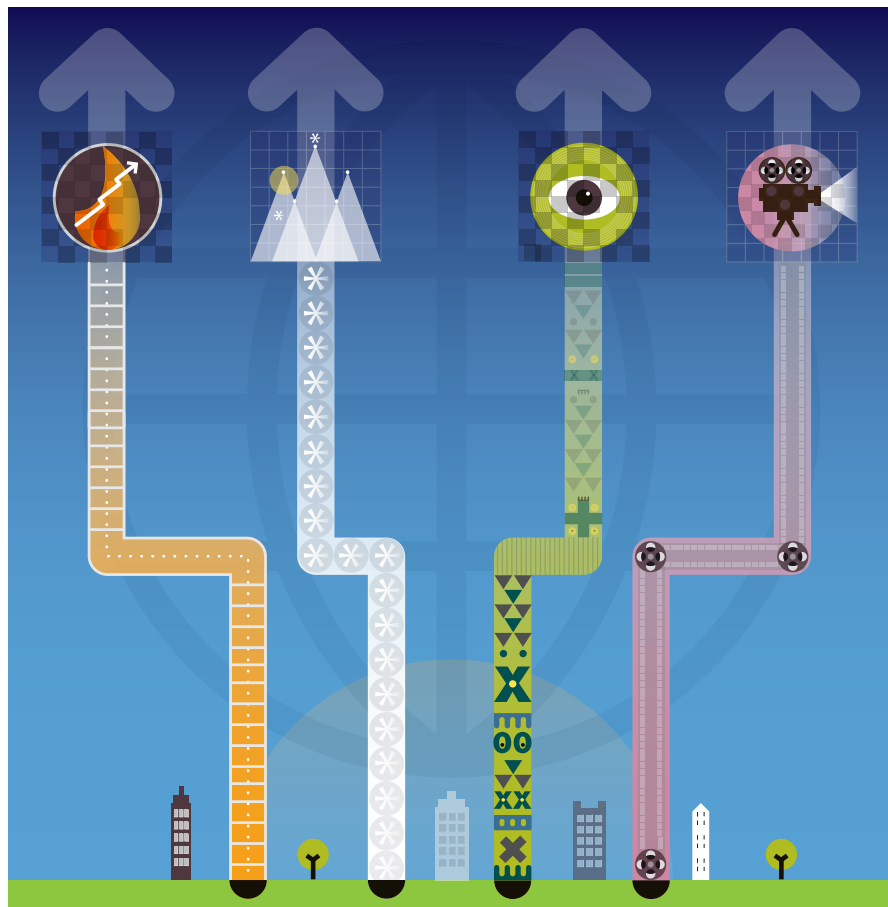
Ultimately we uncovered seven interdependent metaphors, four of which are outlined in this article: fire (representing ambition), snowball (accountability), mask (authenticity), and movie (self-reflection). As familiar as these may sound, they contain useful insights about how leaders can become more effective. And their familiarity means you can recall them easily—which is helpful when trying to change entrenched behavior—and talk about them effectively with a group. As the organizational theorist Karl Weick once wrote, "People see more things than they can describe in words."

Fear may provide the initial spark, but aspiration is a far more important motivator.

Since our initial CEO analysis, we have used the metaphors with more than 10,000 managers on four continents as a way of pushing them to ask tough questions and to make changes based on the answers. The feedback we've received suggests that they are a reliable catalyst for individual and organizational transformation. In the examples below, you'll see how some of our initial study subjects—and other executives—embraced the metaphors with great success. We also offer a few prompts to help you kick off your own leadership transformation.

FIRE

In the modern business context, you can always find a crisis to respond to. That's why there are a lot of these arsonist firefighters. I used to be that way, too. Nowadays I definitely prefer to move toward something rather than away from something.

—Tim, CEO research subject

In 2004 Tim was desperate to turn around his advertising company. Profits were down, employees were quitting, and competitors were gaining ground. He had

personal issues, too. He was insecure about his leadership ability and worried about his health. Listening to his story, and hearing similar ones from other executives, we couldn't help thinking of the proverbial burning platform: Tim was putting out fires. But many conversations later, we found something else burning in Tim—ambition. He told us he wanted to "lead a big and authentic life" and to push his organization toward worthy social causes. Within three years he had done just that, helping to found the Earth Hour campaign, which in 2011 led more than one billion people around the globe to turn off their lights in a symbolic stand against climate change. This initiative won his agency a Titanium award, the most prestigious advertising award in the world.

For us, fire represents the forces that initiate a personal or organizational transformation and sustain it over time. Conventional change literature suggests that fear is a necessary and even desirable motivator. By contrast, our research suggests that although fear may provide the initial spark for action, aspiration is a far more important motivator. Sustainable change requires the fire of a "burning ambition."

We recently used this metaphor with the executive team of a global IT services company—a group of presidents from 10 countries who were consumed by their burning platform: a huge budget, internal problems, and very difficult marketplace conditions. As the conversation shifted toward their collective aspirations, the president of strategy declared that it was time the team focused on the future instead of its current pain. The president of sales followed that provocation by explaining that he had grown up only a mile from the company's head office and had always dreamed of working there. Now his dream was to make the company a leader

ASK YOURSELF

What are the forces compelling your organization to change?

What are the forces compelling you to change?

What do you want to gain personally from the transformation effort?

What legacy do you want to create for your organization?

in the emerging services economy. Inspired, the team agreed. Subsequently the company shifted investment dollars toward new services such as cloud computing and cybersecurity. The global head of sales and marketing later reflected, "The notion of a burning ambition was a revelation, and my focus shifted almost immediately. I hadn't realized how consumed I had become fighting fires. The metaphor has helped me to ignite enthusiasm for the new direction."
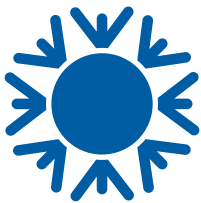
SNOWBALL

I shared with my team the kind of leader I aspired to be. I asked every member to hold me accountable to that vision. This set an expectation that each of them would mirror my commitment. Soon we added more layers of leadership to the process, all accountable to one another regardless of our position in the hierarchy. It felt like a massive snowball rolling down the hill, with me trapped in the middle. **—Clynton, CEO research subject**

Clynton, the managing director of a large German beauty corporation, was exhausted by the passive culture in his company: Everyone depended on him and avoided hard decisions. He wanted his senior managers to take more initiative. It took a 360-degree review to show him that his directive leadership style was a big part of the problem. He could have worked in private to change his behavior—but instead he stood up at an annual meeting of his top 60 managers, acknowledged his failings, and outlined both his personal and his organizational goals. He admitted that he didn't have all the answers and asked his team for help leading the company. By exposing himself in this way, he set a standard—and an agenda—for others to follow. As more people got on board, the momentum increased. Over the next two years Clynton became very

adept at using silence and open-ended questions to encourage his team to step up. His effectiveness surged, and his team flourished; dependent behaviors gave way to initiative and innovation, and his organization has outperformed much larger competitors in the six years since.

The snowball represents a cycle of mutual accountability that creates momentum for change. It starts rolling when a leader opens himself up to the scrutiny of subordinates and asks for their support. This act of humility is seen as courageous and inspires others to follow suit. As more members of the team join the process (and those causing drag are removed), the snowball becomes more tightly compacted and almost impossible to stop.

The managing director of a large Australian grocery company used this metaphor with his top 30 leaders, acknowledging that he had been too hands-on as a manager and asking them to shoulder more responsibility for spurring growth. Affected by his candor, the team members committed to taking more initiative, increasing collaboration, and owning their units' performance. Once they started holding one another accountable to these new standards, change was fast and dramatic. Leadership effectiveness ratings increased across the team (the managing director's scores rose the most), and the company grew in a declining market for the next two years. The managing director later said, "Before the metaphor, nothing seemed to move without my pushing it. Now we have so much more forward momentum, and I'm not controlling any of it!"

ASK YOURSELF

How open and accountable are you prepared to be?

How can you create accountability throughout your organization, from the leadership team down?

How might you address the potential sources of drag or friction?

MASK

I felt ill prepared for my promotion to such a big job, so I tried to bluff my way through. I thought, "OK, I will be the tough guy. It's working for my boss; he's scaring the hell out of me." But this didn't work, so I tried a different approach: "I'll be the nice guy. 'Thank you for saying thank you!'" That didn't work either. I was guessing and making it up as I went along. I was a bit of a fake."

—Mike, CEO research subject

Mike, the CEO of a multinational IT outsourcer, had a very difficult first three months in the job. The company's financial results were poor, and his credibility was being called into question. It quickly became clear that Mike himself was a major cause of the problems. His inconsistent behavior meant that his colleagues wasted energy trying to second-guess him. He realized that he would need to drop the imitations and rebuild his leadership identity. That meant focusing on his core business values—fairness and accountability—along with values he'd previously reserved for his family, such as empathy and connection. Once Mike started behaving more authentically at work, his team began to engage with him in increasingly positive ways, and his superiors became more trusting and supportive. Over the next five years Mike's leadership effectiveness ratings soared, and the company's profits more than tripled.

In our research we found two ways in which leaders use a mask. One is to conceal perceived inadequacies and flaws to preserve the polished facade we have come to expect of "great" leaders. The other, more subtle way is to adopt a certain persona at work that the leader feels is necessary for success. Both uses undermine trust and effectiveness. They also create inner conflict, as leaders struggle to align their work and home lives. By dropping the mask, a leader can craft a more meaningful and congruent identity, which enhances relationships and business outcomes.

ASK YOURSELF

What imperfections might you be concealing from your stakeholders?

What personae are you adopting to be "successful"?

What are the costs of these masks for your personal life, wellbeing, and effectiveness as a leader?

How could you bring more of your authentic self to work?

We recently saw this happen with the head of a leading Australian wealth management business. He had adopted a highly intellectual, somewhat aloof persona at work, even though he was very warm and humble in private. This persona discouraged people from committing to him and promoted formality at the expense of collaboration. When presented with the mask metaphor, the leader quickly recognized himself. He saw that his once-helpful "smartest guy in the room" act was now hurting him. In preparation for a series of employee meetings, he decided to ditch the facts and figures and instead tell a personal story about his passion for the company and its customers and how he wanted to change perceptions about the industry. Though less polished than usual, he received enthusiastic applause and positive feedback from staff members. In the months that followed, staff turnover dropped by 15%, while employee engagement scores increased in equal measure. The leader later reflected, "The metaphor gave me both insight about the mask I was wearing and permission to drop it. I wish I'd done it sooner. Life has been so much easier and more rewarding since."

MOVIE

The biggest realization is that if you want change, you've got to stand outside yourself and look back as if you were seeing yourself replayed on video.

—Alan, CEO research subject

When Alan accepted his role as the CEO of a German chemical and pharmaceutical

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multinational, he was given a very simple brief from his boss: "Debuild the Prussian Empire." Employee engagement scores were terrible, and financial performance had stalled. But Alan's initial efforts to change the entrenched culture were failing. In an ironic twist, he had even started to adopt the same bullying behavior he was struggling to eradicate. At first he couldn't see it. But over time, as he was encouraged to review his interactions with colleagues, he could. As his self-awareness increased, he was able to make better choices under pressure, to more intentionally direct his own performance, and to encourage his team to do the same. Rather than competing with one another, as they had done in the past, his team members began to see the benefits of collaborating. Over the next three years the company exceeded all financial targets, and its culture changed so much that it earned a prestigious Hewitt Best Employers award.

The movie metaphor encourages leaders to "view" and "replay" their behavior, "edit" their performance, and "direct" a story that is more in line with their vision. Before our initial research subjects became effective leaders, they all seemed to be acting repetitively and perpetuating their own misery, a bit like Bill Murray in the film *Groundhog Day*. The first step toward change was a commitment to evaluate "raw footage" after an event or an interaction—on their own, with a coach, or with trusted colleagues—and think about what they could have done differently. Eventually they learned to edit themselves in real time and make a better movie.

One general manager of a large construction company used this metaphor to counteract the destructive competitive culture that pervaded his team. His attitude toward new project bids had always been "If we don't win, we've failed." His

aim was to motivate, but the result was fear. Any unsuccessful bid led to a blame game that consumed enormous energy and destroyed morale, hurting the team's chances of winning the next project.

After reflecting on his behavior and its consequences, the general manager realized that he needed to set an example by taking a new approach—"If we don't win, we have an opportunity to learn." He set up a new review process, in which everyone had to reject aggression and blame in favor of curiosity and learning. In the months following, the company's win rate for new bids increased, revenue went up by more than 250%, and staff turnover dropped to 7% against an industry average of 17%. "The movie metaphor forced me to see where I was my own worst enemy," the manager told us. "Now I'm more thoughtful and far more effective as a leader."

THESE METAPHORS were forged in the brutally honest reflections of a select group of successful CEOs. We have used them to explain, inspire, and accelerate leadership transformation in managers at all levels, in all types of organizations, around the world. We encourage you to identify your own burning ambition, to create a snowball of accountability around your drive toward it, to drop any masks that are preventing you from getting there, and to constantly review and edit your story as a movie director would. These seemingly simple prompts will push you into the kind of organized reflection and purposeful action that mark highly effective leaders. ▱   **HBR Reprint** R1111L

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ASK YOURSELF

In what ways are you trapped in a "bad movie" and perpetuating your own problems?

What opportunities do you have to review the "footage" and reflect on your actions?

What methods could you employ to slow your movie down and "direct" a better one in the moment?